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ABSTRACT

An individualized college writing and literature course, entitled "Fiction and American Society," was especially designed for a group of five nontraditional (older) undergraduate students. Through a combination of individual readings, student-professor conferences, and group meetings, the program sought to make the students familiar with a selected group of American novels and to generate critical discussion (oral and written). A list of American novels with social themes was developed, and each student prepared an individual list of at least seven titles which became a personal reading list for the course--although selections could be changed as work progressed. Materials used in the course consisted of individual novels, duplicated versions of each student's papers (generally exchanged at the weekly group meetings), brief biographical sketches of authors, a bibliographic source list and a library reserve list, personal bibliographic materials and background sources, and guide questions to direct student reading. Students were evaluated on the basis of seven or eight critical essays, each of which had to include views of at least one critical article and the student's response to that article. The students read extensively, developed their research skills, and produced well-written essays. While all admitted to feeling pressure, all but one met this challenge and felt favorably toward the course. (HOD)

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"Fiction and American Society": An Experimental Writing and Literature Course for Nontraditional Students

A small group of nontraditional York College of Pennsylvania undergraduates participated during the summer of 1979 in a specially designed individualized writing and literature course, "Fiction and American Society." The program sought, through a combination of individual readings, student-professor conferences, and group meetings, to enable the students to accomplish the following skills:

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1. to gain and demonstrate, through papers, conferences, and group discussion, familiarity with a selected group of significant American novels
2. to generate critical discussion, oral and written, of these novels, chiefly from a social themes approach
3. to become familiar with various novels other than those actually read by the individual through exchange of ideas and reading experiences at group meetings.

The five students initially selected for the course through preliminary interviews possessed certain common characteristics: all had expressed interest in such a course; all were nontraditional students over age 25; all were interested in reading; all had earned above-average grades in a required two-semester freshman composition course. The group was joined by the Dean of Academic Affairs as an auditor.

These characteristics proved important to the success of the program; students lacking maturity and self-motivation are

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unlikely to persevere despite the pressures of such a course itself and of a compressed summer schedule. The significance of careful student selection and pre-course screening was underlined by the inability of one of the students, distracted from the course by the pressures of moving into a new home, to participate in conferences and group sessions and, eventually, by her failure to complete the course papers and readings by the end of the summer session. Restricting participation to nontraditional students seemed to enhance group rapport and the effectiveness of the group meetings; these students proved reliable, following through on their course commitments without the coercion of quizzes, tests, or frequent class meetings. Further, they were not only strong students, but possessed insights into the social dimension of literature where most traditional students could provide merely naivete.

The course began with student interest. During the spring, 1979, semester, several nontraditional students (some of whom had been in composition class with me) brought up the possibility of some kind of specialized fiction and writing class. In response, I prepared a list of American novels with social themes--a topic that interested me--and met again with the students to talk about each novel on the list. Eventually, each student developed an individual list of at least seven titles which became a personal reading list for the course, although selections could be (and were) changed as work progressed. (Although students were free to suggest novels other than those on the master list, none did so.)

While minor alterations were made in the students' lists, for the most part the reading lists remained unchanged. Over the eight-week duration of the course (which extended across two summer sessions), most of the course commitment of each student involved reading the novels on the individual list, locating and consulting relevant criticism, and preparing a brief essay (3-5 typed pages) on each novel. Each student was also to meet weekly with me for a scheduled conference. The students also met once weekly as a group for a 3-3½ hour session, a practice that ultimately proved to be the catalyst which led to the course's success.

The materials used in the course consisted of:

1. The individual novels.
2. Duplicated versions of each student's papers, generally exchanged at the weekly group meetings.
3. Brief biographical sketches of authors.
4. A bibliographic source list and a library reserve list, both used to provide background materials.
5. Personal bibliographic materials and background sources made available in the conferences.
6. Guide questions to direct student reading, unify the course around chosen themes, and provide ideas for approaches to be used in the critical essays.

Although the students were not told to group novels by any specific themes, certain ones emerged from their own selections. When this happened, I scheduled groups of related works for the same seminar meeting. Thus, a coherence not really anticipated emerged. When no such natural grouping appeared, I arranged

the novels into rough chronological clusters. The themes which emerged, several of which overlapped, include:

1. Patterns of social class in America
2. The Black search for identity in American society
3. Woman's search for identity in American society
4. Patterns of maturation: the initiation motif
5. The urban novel and the small town novel
6. Marxist solutions to American social problems
7. The poor, the immigrant, the dispossessed in America.

The individual reading and research which formed the basis for the course allowed a flexibility used to good advantage by the nontraditional students in this group; most scheduled their reading and research around home and job responsibilities, but nevertheless succeeded in completing this phase of the work at a consistent pace. However, the independent reading segment alone provided only limited student growth; one student who restricted her efforts largely to this phase became the only one in the group who failed to complete her readings and essays by the end of the summer session.

The regularly scheduled student-teacher conferences aided the students' individual efforts by affording an opportunity for discussion of the works on each "independent reading" list. Background and bibliographical information relating to specific novels and to commentaries on particular novels, was made available to students during these conferences. In addition, they provided an opportunity for me to assist students in preparing and writing papers, to provide evaluations of completed papers, and to distribute materials. (Occasionally pairs of students

working with the same novel chose to schedule a joint conference; tnese meetings also proved successful.) The extent of this conference phase could vary with individual instructors; I found that most conferences averaged about an hour, although they ranged from 45 minutes to nearly two hours.

The usual complement of five or six worked well for the weekly group meetings; at least four students are needed for effective interchange of ideas, but expansion beyond seven or eight might weaken that interchange. The group sessions established a camaraderie that unified the class and apparently reinforced each student's sense of participation. Each session began with some version of a covered dish supper, a social element which developed rapport among all the participants involved. The meal was followed by a seminar session in which the students would share critical insights into the novels scheduled for that week, ask questions, and (since specific readings varied) draw connections and establish comparisons among related novels. As the course progressed, students also started to compare positions of secondary criticism and to relate novels under consideration in one week to those we had studied earlier. The success of these group sessions seemed to result, not only from the closeness of shared experience, but also from peer pressure, since everyone was expected to contribute ideas. Once involved, students stayed involved.

The students were evaluated on the basis of the seven or eight critical essays, each of which had to include views of at least one critical article and the student's response to that article. Papers were judged on writing quality, evidence of

knowledge of the novel, individual critical insights, and integration of secondary materials and overall synthesis.

The program succeeded. The students read extensively, developed their research skills, and produced well-written essays. While all admitted to feeling pressure, all but one met this challenge and felt favorably toward the course. Thus, although this approach to a literature course might seem unorthodox, it can be an effective means of presenting literature to nontraditional students.

Certain considerations should be mentioned in closing. Variation in presenting such a course is, naturally, quite possible. The program could be offered either as a scheduled course with limited class meetings (for the group presentations) and considerable use of individual conferences or as a group of concurrent independent study projects sharing certain common elements. I chose the latter plan because York College of Pennsylvania normally requires a minimum student enrollment if a scheduled class is to be offered, a requirement common to many schools, but one which this program's very nature precludes. I also chose to offer this course in the summer to avoid teaching it as an overload in addition to a normal twelve credit schedule (usually three sections of composition and one of literature), since the program <u>does</u> demand considerable teacher (and student) preparation time. (While each student prepares one work per meeting, the professor must prepare all works for that session). One caution: the individual seeking to conduct such a course should be committed to the program for other than financial reasons. The course involved more time than would a conventional

survey, but paid less, since it was administratively only a cluster of independent study projects. But rewards of another sort were plentiful. The enthusiasm and growth of my group of nontraditional students, the sheer enjoyment of sharing ideas with them--these amply repaid my efforts.

Appendix

Novels selected by students in the "Fiction and American Society" seminar:

James Baldwin: Go Tell It on the Mountain
Kate Chopin: The Awakening
Stephen Crane: Maggie, A Girl of the Streets
Theodore Dreiser: Sister Carrie
Ralph Ellison: Invisible Man
Joseph Heller: Catch-22
William Dean Howells: The Rise of Silas Lapham
Henry James: Daisy Miller
Sinclair Lewis: Main Street
Joyce Carol Oates: them
Philip Roth: Goodbye, Columbus
J. D. Salinger: The Catcher in the Rye
Upton Sinclair: The Jungle
John Steinbeck: The Grapes of Wrath
Harriet Beecher Stowe: Uncle Tom's Cabin
Mark Twain: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Richard Wright: Native Son